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Fast Boat to China. Lessons from Shanghai

Description

Review of *Fast Boat to China. Lessons from Shanghai* / Fast Boat to China. Lessons from Shanghai. Andrew Ross New York: Pantheon Books, 2006.

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Fast Boat to China. Lessons from Shanghai

Posted on **February 1, 2007** by **Editor**



By **Jeffrey Barlow** <barlowj@pacificu.edu>

[About](#)

Fast Boat to China. Lessons from Shanghai.

Andrew Ross

New York: Pantheon Books, 2006.

Fast Boat to China was a pleasure to read, and to review. It is one of a number of recent works by authors who, while not trained as Sinologists, are both authoritative witnesses to Chinese events and experts in their own academic field. [1] Andrew Ross is Professor of American Studies and Director of the Metropolitan Studies Program at New York University. [2]

Despite its Sino-centric title, the book is really a broader study into the politics and economics of globalization, particularly of “off-shoring,” the sending of jobs from one country to another. However, like many students of China, Ross was so engaged by it that the work winds up being truly a recent history of the high-tech industry in both China and Taiwan. Indian entrepreneurs too, make their entrance periodically.

The work is fascinating in its detail. Ross lived in Shanghai for over a year and conducted hundreds of interviews ranging from American ex-patriate executives to Chinese and Taiwanese engineers in high-tech firms in coastal and inland China, as well as in Taiwan. We are given succinct summaries of the growth of the industry in many local regions of China.

Ross, however, continually has his eye on a much bigger picture. He sees these local events as the consequence of far larger decisions taken at the national level in Beijing, Taipei, and Washington, D.C. He is particularly adroit at explaining the underlying economic issues which invariably explain the outcomes of various conflicts between Chinese factories and American politicians. The national policy level in the U.S. comes to seem a sort of twenty-first century

Beijing Opera in which politicians decry and declaim while business groups play the tunes from behind the curtain.

Perhaps the major value of the book is that Ross shows us that rather than being a win-lose game between American and Chinese workers for jobs, including now not only white collar but also high-end professional positions, both groups are equally impacted. Both now work in an environment in which their jobs are assumed to be fully portable, and their skills replaceable at lower cost at any moment. Because, however, they are shaped by different cultures, the American, Chinese, Indian, and Taiwanese engineers all make quite different responses to these facts.

And neither, Ross suggests, are the international corporations necessarily the uncontested winner in this contest. In some senses, they too are losers. Not all of the relocated positions turn out to be cost effective as productivity is almost inevitably markedly lower at the new site, and worker loyalty far lower. The new worker knows full well where his or her job came from, and realizes that it will inevitably move on to yet another man or woman in another region or another country. This process the author refers to as “labor arbitrage.”

Ross writes from a very particular perspective. He is far from a free market economist—at one point he writes of the “addled minds” of the free marketers. He refers here to the mindset that wants to see the triumph (or at least the coming, inevitable triumph) of free market capitalism in China. Ross makes a convincing case that the Chinese success in building a highly competitive—if not dominant—high tech industry is in fact a result of government planning. Both national and local Chinese governments have skillfully manipulated investment, employment, tax, labor, pollution, and land use policies to attract the industry and to nurture it.

Ross is rather an advocate of what he calls “alternative globalization,” a globalization guided by the interests of workers, citizens, and the environment rather than solely by corporate profits. From this perspective, he sees China as even more of a challenge than highly corporatized Western governments. The Chinese, while successfully wooing investors, have made sure that labor unions have no place in their particular industrial future. And Chinese workers are culturally so distinctive that not even Mainland Chinese and Taiwanese are capable of joint discussion, let alone action, though both are citizens of greater China.

However, though Ross has his point of view, the work is never strident nor does it really advocate any particular changes. Rather, it is an honest and overwhelmingly successful attempt to see the Chinese high-tech industry for what it is. If the book has faults, it is perhaps its overwhelming detail and the relative absences of conclusions. It is essentially an effective combination of scholarly and journalistic methodologies applied to understanding a very important contemporary problem, but understood within a specific national context, China.

Fast Boat to China is not a how-to-succeed-in-doing-business-in-China sort of book. But it should be read by anyone contemplating jobs being moved to China, whether the job is theirs at

present, or the factory where the job now is performed. It also should be of interest to anyone who wants to get beyond the screen of stereotyped name-calling that often serves as the dominant conversation in the frequent clashes between Chinese and American interests.

Notes

[1] This is not to say that only such dual-qualified authors can produce worthwhile books. Among other useful books we have reviewed are Fishman, Ted C. *China Inc.*, New York: Scribner, 2005. reviewed at: <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2005/04/fishman.php> and Sheff, David. *China Dawn. The Story of A Technology and Business Revolution*. New York: Harper Business, 2002. which we reviewed at: <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2002/10/sheff.php> Both works offer valuable insight, though neither Scheff nor Fishman have the breadth of expertise that Ross brings to this work.

[2] See his academic home page at: <http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/amerstu/ross.html> Among his publications are: *Low Pay, High Profile: The Global Push for Fair Labor* (New Press, 2004); *No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and its Hidden Costs* (Basic Books, 2003) (Beijing, 2004) Paperback edition, Temple University Press, 2004.; *The Celebration Chronicles: Life, Liberty, and The Pursuit of Property Value in Disney's New Town* (New York: Ballantine, 1999) (London, Verso, 2000; Rome, Arcana Libri, 2002); *Real Love: In Pursuit of Cultural Justice* (NYU Press, 1998); *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life: Nature's Debt to Society* (Verso, 1994); *Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits* (Verso, 1991, Sao Paolo, 1994); *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (Routledge, 1989), and many others.

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24 THOUGHTS ON "FAST BOAT TO CHINA. LESSONS FROM SHANGHAI"

Shelton

on **January 31, 2014 at 12:03 AM** said:

Do you have a spam issue on this site; I also am a blogger, and I was wanting to know your situation; many of us have developed some nice methods and we are looking to exchange techniques with others, please shoot me an e-mail if interested.

Dominic

on **January 31, 2014 at 12:38 PM** said:

A person necessarily help to make critically articles I'd state. That is the very first time I frequented your web page and up to now? I surprised with the research you made to create this actual post extraordinary. Magnificent task!

Adam Horwitz

on **February 1, 2014 at 3:24 PM** said:

Aw, this was an exceptionally good post. Taking a few minutes and actual effort to create a top notch article... but what can I say... I put things off a lot and never seem to get nearly anything done.

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on **February 2, 2014 at 1:58 AM** said:

Excellent blog here! Also your web site loads up very fast!
What web host are you using? Can I get your affiliate link to your host?
I wish my web site loaded up as fast as yours lol

lose weight in 3 days

on **February 2, 2014 at 4:42 PM** said:

Hurrah, that's what I was exploring for, what a information!
existing here at this weblog, thanks admin of this web site.

fort worth dwi lawyer home equity line credit top hosting 0 percent apr credit cards how to avoid foreclosure business credit card machine stacie eiffel 65

**messenger plus find a grave stormy erotikmix jamie eason celebrity oops
maquest diccionari i still**

on **February 2, 2014 at 11:05 PM** said:

I got this website from my buddy who shared with me concerning this web site and at the moment this time I am browsing this web page and reading very informative articles at this place.

affiliate benchmarks

on **February 3, 2014 at 12:46 AM** said:

Hi i am kavin, its my first occasion to commenting anywhere, when i read this post i thought i could also create comment due to this good article.

naija

on **February 3, 2014 at 1:32 AM** said:

I did finally watch A Mighty Wind! Great stuff!

mobile device management

on **February 3, 2014 at 7:04 AM** said:

Wonderful beat ! I wish to apprentice at the same time as you amend your website, how can i subscribe for a weblog site?

The account aided me a appropriate deal. I were tiny bit acquainted of this your broadcast provided vivid clear concept

how to make money

on **February 3, 2014 at 8:25 AM** said:

Attractive component of content. I just stumbled upon your blog and in accession capital to say that I acquire actually enjoyed account your weblog posts. Any way I'll be subscribing to your augment or even I fulfillment you get right of entry to persistently quickly.

Covert Code

on **February 3, 2014 at 8:49 AM** said:

If some one wants expert view regarding running a blog then i propose him/her to pay a quick visit this blog, Keep up the fastidious job.

Abigail

on **February 3, 2014 at 3:53 PM** said:

Hmm is anyone else having problems with the pictures on this blog loading? I'm trying to find out if its a problem on my end or if it's the blog. Any suggestions would be greatly appreciated.

network marketing utah

on **February 3, 2014 at 7:15 PM** said:

This is really interesting, You're a very skilled blogger.

I have joined your rss feed and look forward to seeking more of your great post.

Also, I have shared your web site in my social networks!

online jobs ph

on **February 3, 2014 at 11:46 PM** said:

Appreciating the time and effort you put into your blog and detailed information you provide.

It's awesome to come across a blog every once in a while that isn't the same out of date rehashed material. Fantastic read!

I've saved your site and I'm adding your RSS feeds to my Google account.

wall street Orlando

on **February 4, 2014 at 1:16 AM** said:

I always used to study post in news papers but now as I am a user of net thus from now I am using net for articles, thanks to web.

Alice

on **February 4, 2014 at 6:54 AM** said:

Hey there! I've been reading your weblog for a while now and finally got the bravery to go ahead and give you a shout out from Houston Texas!

Just wanted to say keep up the fantastic job!

Work From Home Excuses

on **February 4, 2014 at 7:31 AM** said:

Hello there, just became alert to your blog through Google, and found that it's truly informative. I'm going to watch out for brussels. I will appreciate if you continue this in future. A lot of people will be benefited from your writing. Cheers!

free internet marketing

on **February 4, 2014 at 11:22 AM** said:

It's appropriate time to make a few plans for the future and it's time to be happy. I've read this post and if I could I want to suggest you few interesting issues or advice. Maybe you can write next articles regarding this article. I want to read even more things approximately it!

best online money making ideas

on **February 5, 2014 at 3:34 AM** said:

I was excited to find this web site. I need to to thank you for ones time for this particularly wonderful read!!
I definitely really liked every little bit of it
and I have you bookmarked to look at new things on your web site.

easy ways

on **February 5, 2014 at 3:47 AM** said:

I just like the helpful information you supply in your articles.

I'll bookmark your weblog and check once more right here frequently.
I'm relatively certain I'll be informed lots of new stuff proper right here!
Best of luck for the following!

empower vision

on **February 5, 2014 at 11:55 AM** said:

If you desire to improve your knowledge only keep visiting this site and be updated with the newest information posted here.

Gitaon **February 5, 2014 at 12:03 PM** said:

An interesting discussion is worth comment. I believe that you need to write more about this subject, it may not be a taboo matter but usually people do not speak about such topics. To the next! All the best!!

creator jobson **February 5, 2014 at 12:55 PM** said:

I have been surfing online more than 4 hours today, yet I never found any interesting article like yours.

It's pretty worth enough for me. In my view, if all site owners and bloggers made good content as you did, the internet will be much more useful than ever before.

Web site Marketingon **February 6, 2014 at 2:20 AM** said:

It is not my first time to pay a quick visit this web site, i am visiting this website dailly and get good facts from here everyday.